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Vivre, penser, écrire en exil

Editorial

Éditorial

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Ralph Schor

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- 1 Since the end of the 19th century, France has been one of the principal countries of immigration in the world. European migrants, who formed the majority between the two world wars, were followed, during the thirty-year period of economic growth following the Second World War (known as the “*Trente Glorieuses*” in France), by increasing numbers of migrants from North Africa, then sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. Newcomers were mainly men, driven from their home countries by poverty and looking for properly paid work. Among the foreigners were also, in lesser numbers, political refugees, intellectuals ill-at-ease in societies imposing a rigid moral order, rich inactive individuals attracted by France’s reputation.
- 2 There were as many different experiences as there were immigrants. Some of them have been recorded in writing. Researchers in social sciences and humanities have long endeavoured to collect “these voices from the past”, to use Philippe Joutard’s expression¹. Oral history and interviews conducted by sociologists offer spontaneous testimony, interesting in terms of the events chosen, the silences, both intended and unintended, the laughter and anger, the approximations. This material, dotted with the clichés of everyday language, expresses a kind of popular culture. In contrast, academic culture can be embodied by literature. Whether in the form of a novel, a short story, theatre, poetry, a song, works that are autobiographical to varying degrees, such literature offers sometimes very detailed reflection, a purposeful and structured insight providing keys to understanding the personalities of the authors, their position in society, the experiences they have been through in their countries of origin or in France.
- 3 This dossier comprises four studies concerning different periods, authors and nationalities. They share the common feature of exploring foreign writers who have lived or are living in France. Criteria of literary talent and the aesthetic appeal of the

works were not taken into account. Certainly, the following pages contain references to outstanding writers, considered among the great literary figures. Yet, they appear alongside second-rate writers, who have sometimes been justifiably forgotten in literary history. Indeed, the researchers who wrote the four analyses that follow did not dwell on stylistic considerations and formal success, because to them writers lacking impetus and creativity, relating in a matter-of-fact way their daily lives, encounters, fantasies, are equally as precious as great artists who, owing to their genius, go beyond mere description and dissect first appearances. These two literary actors seem complementary: the first is a photographer who faithfully transcribes reality; the second is an interpreter who takes us beyond the sensory world.

- 4 Neither were public reception or the overall success of the works criterion for selection. Some famous names can certainly be found in the following pages, including Ivan Bunin, Nobel Prize winner, Vladimir Nabokov, Joseph Kessel, Henri Troyat, Azouz Beggag, Mehdi Charef, Mouloud Mammeri, Mohammed Dib, Julien Green, James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Alain Mabanckou, Daniel Biyaoula, etc. These great names mingle with lesser known authors. Some authors who are eminent today were recognized late in their careers. Indeed, Russians and Americans publishing in Paris in their own language often addressed small audiences; Arab speakers wrote for readers who were frequently illiterate, including in Arabic; those who published works in Algeria inspired by the school of socialist realism, favoured by Soviet theorists, discouraged the public with their heavy didacticism. In fact, what matters to researchers in social sciences and humanities is not so much the commercial appeal or even the language used as the value of testimony about exile. Kateb Yacine sums up the real point of the investigation in a striking formula: "I write in French to tell the French that I am not French".
- 5 The exiles' material living conditions were not without effect on the artistic creations. A small minority of writers enjoying adequate means contrasts with a majority facing discomfort and even extreme poverty. The doomed poet, an unsung genius, sick in his icy garret, is undoubtedly a romantic myth, but it is clear that, for many, insecurity, wandering, and the futile search for employment constitute a painful and formative experience. Exile also brings writers into contact with many other experiences in the administrative, political, cultural, social and psychological fields. Their works often become the reflection, account, whether actual or transposed, of the discoveries made during their stay in France. Some isolate themselves; others retreat into a circle of fellow compatriots or, on the contrary, seek contact with their hosts. Membership of associations or trade unions, day-to-day meetings, visits to cafés and community groups bring about a sociability that is a source of new insights. Arrival in Paris also opens up new perspectives: the discovery of the great city with its illustrious past, renowned for its cultural vitality and the freedom it offers its visitors presents an opportunity to ascertain whether the myth is overrated.
- 6 Ultimately, exile leads writers to question their identity. This differs depending on generation - young people are more malleable - social background, standard of living, political choices, and individual personality. In any case, whether writers isolate themselves or open themselves up to contact, whether they try to pursue their previous life or accept new practices, whether they express the pain of separation or their hope on the threshold of a supposedly better life, whether they are nostalgic or optimistic, whether they feel useless or vibrant, they reflect on their original identity

as compared to the French national personality. This asceticism often offers the opportunity to understand the essence of an original identity experienced as a natural state until that point. However, this reflection is carried out at a distance, in a land of exile, so that individuals, cut off from their living roots, often wonder whether the country they are thinking about is real or fantasised, transformed by distance and the length of separation. Many consider that exile helps to understand what one is or was, but is the image that is then formed accurate? Thus, the White Russians of the interwar period, even when they considered themselves the most authentic and legitimate heirs of their great homeland, wondered whether, at such a distance, they were constructing a distorted memory that might even prevent them from evoking the past.

- 7 Those who live in exile cannot forever lock themselves in their native identity. The passage of time and the need to establish some relationships with the host society lead to adjustments, be they conscious or unconscious, making accommodations out of necessity, a gradual absorption of the new environment in which they are evolving. Indeed, it becomes difficult to find one's place by obstinately remaining what one is at the beginning and avoiding the attention of others. Thus, a dual identity is formed, a sort of blending, which may be accepted to varying extents.
- 8 This reconfiguration places intellectuals in a complex position: they remain exiles in the host society where they are not fully integrated, and they partly become foreigners in their society of origin where they no longer fully conform. Those who believe that they can resolve the discomfort generated by this identity gap by returning to the land of their ancestors often find themselves lost because they no longer correspond to expectations, they do not speak the country's language properly, they no longer respect, or have forgotten, the rules observed by their former compatriots. In short, as exiles in France, they become exiles in their country of origin. This is why many of the works written by emigrant writers end, as a tragic metaphor, with the madness or death of the protagonist, or at a minimum reduced to an inability to communicate, wherever he/she lives.
- 9 Exile thus constitutes a traumatic episode in an artist's career. Some, especially the younger ones, manage to overcome the shock and, liberated from what they experienced as outdated constraints, begin a new, freer life. Many, caught in a dual sense of belonging, wonder who they are, consider themselves and society, the one they were born into and the one they live in, without always finding an answer. In every case, exile is a challenge for an artist, a source of inspiration and a unique opportunity to plunge into the depths of existence.

NOTES

1. Joutard Philippe (1983) *Ces voix qui nous viennent du passé*, Paris, Hachette, 268 pp.

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